

# Enthymeme

Version 1.4

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The first example involves four figures from the world of classical antiquity.

**Epicurus** (c. 340-270 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher in the period after Aristotle. He was a thorough materialist; he was also a hedonist, holding that the only thing of any value or importance in life is pleasurable feeling and the absence of pain. **Plutarch** (c. 46-120 C.E.) was a Greek writer on many subjects, especially the lives of famous people. **Plato** (c. 427-347 B.C.), perhaps the most celebrated ancient philosopher, was the teacher of Aristotle. **Aulus Gellius** (c. 130-80 C.E.) was a Roman writer. His one book, *Attic Nights*, a miscellaneous collection of notes and reminiscences, makes frequent reference to his student days in Athens. In Book II, Chapter viii, Gellius takes Plutarch to task for an unfair criticism of Epicurus<sup>1</sup>:

— Aulus Gellius (c. 175 C.E.) —  
 "Plutarch, . . . asserts that Epicurus made use of an incomplete, perverted and faulty argument, and he quotes Epicurus' own words: '*Death is nothing to us, for what is dissolved is without feeling, and what is without feeling is nothing to us.*'"

"Now Epicurus," says Plutarch, 'omitted what he ought to have stated at the beginning, that *death is a dissolution of body and soul*, and then, to prove something else, he goes on to use the very premise he had omitted, as if it had been stated and conceded. But this argument,' Plutarch continues, 'cannot advance, unless the premise be first presented.'

"What Plutarch wrote as to the form and sequence of a syllogism is true enough; for if you wish to argue and reason according to the teaching of the schools, you ought to say:

Death is the dissolution of soul and body;  
 What is dissolved is without feeling;  
 What is without feeling is nothing to us.

But we cannot suppose that Epicurus, being the man he was, omitted that part of the syllogism through ignorance, or

that it was his intention to state a syllogism complete with all its premises and conclusions, as is done in the schools of the philosophers; but since the separation of body and soul by death is self-evident, he of course did not think it necessary to call attention to what was perfectly obvious to everyone.

"For the same reason too he put the conclusion of the syllogism, not at the end, but at the beginning; for who does not see that this also was not due to inadvertance?

"In Plato too you will often find syllogisms in which the order prescribed in the schools is disregarded and inverted, with a kind of lofty disdain for criticism."

Gellius is surely right to protest Plutarch's nit picking. The argument of Epicurus was simply an *enthymeme*.

Or rather, it was a *sorites*, a 'heap' of syllogisms, the first of which was an entheme. Properly set out the sorites would look like this, with the unstated parts in brackets:

What is dissolved is without feeling;  
[Death is dissolution of soul and body;]  
[Death is without feeling.]  
What is without feeling is nothing to us;  
 Death is nothing to us.

Or, to carry the analysis further, we can identify the Universe of Discourse and define terms. That's not so easy in this case, but perhaps the following will do:

Universe of Discourse: times.  
 Dx = x is a time of death; Sx = x is a time of soul-body dissolution; Fx = x is a time of feeling; Cx = x is a time of concern to us.

All S are non-F	
[All D are S]	
[All D are non-F]	(Barbara AAA-I)
All non-F are non-C	
All D are non-C	(Barbara AAA-I <sup>2</sup> )

1. We follow, with a few changes, the translation of John C. Rolfe in the Loeb edition.

2. Note the premises are not in standard order.

The subject of Enthymeme is also discussed in the *Port Royal Logic* (1662), Chapter xiv<sup>3</sup>.

Port Royal Logic (1662)  
 "We have already stated that an *enthymeme* is a *sylogism* perfect in the mind, but imperfect in the expression, since some one of the propositions is suppressed as too clear and too well known, and as being easily supplied by the mind of those to whom we speak. . . .

". . . this suppression flatters the vanity of those to whom we speak, in leaving something to their intelligence, and, by abbreviating conversation, renders it more lively and effective. It is certain, for example, that if of this verse of the *Medea* of Ovid—which contains a very elegant enthymeme:—

Save thee I could—could I not then destroy?<sup>4</sup>  
 we were to make a formal argument in this way:

*He who is able to save is able to destroy;*  
*Now, I am able to save thee;*  
*Therefore, I am able to destroy thee;*

all the grace would vanish. . . .

"It happens, also, sometimes, that we include the two propositions of an enthymeme in a single proposition, . . . of which [Aristotle] furnishes the following example:

*O mortal, cherish not immortal hate!*

The entire argument would be:

*He who is mortal ought not to cherish*  
*immortal hate;*  
*Now, you are mortal;*  
*Therefore, &c.*

And the perfect enthymeme would be—

*You are mortal, let not your hatred,*  
*therefore, be immortal."*

Thomas Wilson, in his *The Rule of Reason* (1551) also discussed enthymemes<sup>5</sup>:

Thomas Wilson (1551)  
**Of an unperfect argument, called**  
***Enthymema***

"An unperfect argument, is an argument wanting some part, the which is, when one Proposition is rehearsed, and the conclusion straight brought in thereupon, as thus.

That is not good, which bringeth a  
 man to mischief.  
 Therefore money is not good.

The Bible teacheth a man his duty  
 towards God, and his neighbor.  
 Ergo, it is necessary to be known  
 and read of everybody.

Pleasure bringeth endless pain after  
 it.  
 Ergo pleasure is to [be] eschewed.

"These arguments be unperfect arguments wanting one proposition evermore, the which if we add, a perfect argumentation followeth thereupon, as thus.

Whatsoever bringeth endless pain after it,  
 that same is to be eschewed.  
Pleasure bringeth endless pain after it.  
 Ergo pleasure is to be eschewed.

"These unperfect arguments called *Enthymata*, consist partly of likelyhoods, and partly of infallible reasons.

"Likelyhoods, are those, that often hit the truth, and yet are not always so, as thus.

Such a young man talketh often, and that  
 alone also, with such a young maid.  
 Ergo he is in love with her.

"This may be true, and this may be false, for although the conjecture have some probability with it, yet it is not forever true. The other called infallible reasons, or rather necessary arguments, must by all reason be evermore true, as thus.

Such a woman is brought in bed.  
 Ergo, she hath had the company of a man.

"Therefore in all communication, good heed ought to be taken that likelyhoods of things, be not used for necessary reasons."

3. Baynes translation (Edinburgh: William Blackwood), first published 1851, p. 229.

4. *Servari potui, perdere an possim rogas?*

5. Edited by Richard S. Sprague (Northridge, California: San Fernando Valley State College, 1972), p. 76. Spelling modernized.